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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 002905

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/27/2019  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [ECON](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: FAR AS A MODEL FOR CIVIL EMPOWERMENT

REF: A. MOSCOW 2841  
[1](#)B. MOSCOW 180

Classified By: Acting Pol Min Couns David Kostelancik for reasons 1.4 (b, d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: As the State Duma prepared to vote on legislation that would have doubled the base vehicle registration tax November 18, the Federation of Automobile Owners of Russia (FAR) had already collected 85,000 signatures for a presidential petition against the measure. After unanimous United Russia backing for the legislation trumped unanimous opposition party disapproval in the Duma, the Federation Council swiftly rejected the highly unpopular bill. All commentators agreed State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov's lack of awareness of the grassroots popular resistance to the increase greatly embarrassed United Russia days before an annual party conference on November 21 (Ref A). The incident served to highlight the political will behind FAR as the organization prepares to fight vehicle licensing tax increases at the regional level. FAR intends to become a non-governmental institution providing thoughtful analysis of automobile issues to policy makers. The organization appears capable of mobilizing a significant democratic base demanding reform and greater voice in government, a goal which has largely eluded Russia's serious opposition parties.

#### Plans for the Future

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[1](#)2. (C) Sergey Kanaev, Moscow head of FAR, met with NSC Russian Director Howard Solomon on November 3 and again with the Embassy on November 24 to describe his vision for the growth of the movement, as well as the short-term challenge of fighting a raise in regional vehicle licensing tax rates. When asked whether he felt that FAR deserved the lion's share of credit for overturning the previous week's Duma legislation, Kanaev replied, "There is no point asking the question when everyone was against this law." He continued this point, stressing that FAR's goal is not to become a political party -- despite press reports to the contrary -- but a lobbying group working with the government to represent automobile drivers. The strength of the organization will come from representing a legitimate and politically-active interest group. The movement's goal, he argued, was to become highly respected as a source of information and analysis about the views of car owners. At that point, he predicted, the government would choose to consult on legislation out of a genuine desire to understand public opinion on issues. While he admitted protest actions had their uses, he also believed that FAR would be most successful when it provided pragmatic as well as popular policy advice to the government. Kanaev felt the Gryzlov affair was a major boon to FAR not only because federal auto taxes were stymied, but more importantly because it signaled to the administration that similar situations might be avoided in the future with proper consultation.

¶3. (C) While the State Duma, after the Federation Council's rejection, then scrapped plans to double Federal auto licensing fees, their legislation effectively allows local governments to double licensing fees. FAR is preparing to oppose these fee hikes across Russia, but Kanaev admitted that organizational resources were in short supply. The movement is structured around a governing council composed of one elected representative from each Russian region. At present 28 regions are represented. An additional 19 regions have established FAR offices but have not yet elected a representative. Kanaev was frank that it had already been decided not to oppose tax increases in Moscow or St. Petersburg because the administrative and burden involved in organizing successful protests in those cities was too great. The movement must focus in regions where it is strongest. In support of this end, FAR is creating a management team composed of political strategists, accountants, PR advisors and lawyers. This team, financed through membership dues, will have no executive authority, and will work to support FAR representatives and their regional offices when needed.

#### FAR as a Model for Social Government

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¶4. (C) Kanaev also serves as Chairman for the Society for the Protection of Automobilists' Rights, though he said it is only to pay the bills. For members of the organization, FAR is an opportunity to change Russia for the better by empowering ordinary citizens to influence the policies of their government at the grassroots level. This social control is indispensable in attempting to combat, for

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example, the corruption of traffic police. Kanaev blames those who pay bribes as much as the police who demand them. In his view, corrupt law enforcement cannot be expected to police itself -- and he views FAR's tactics of grassroots social organization as a model for addressing corruption throughout the Russian government. Convincing individuals that the regular solicitation of bribes by the traffic police should not be common place in Russia is a noble goal. Empowering individual drivers to refuse a bribe when a traffic cop is standing at their window, however, may prove to be a Herculean feat.

#### Partners

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¶5. (C) Kanaev identified four organizations with similar goals and strong connections to FAR:

-- The Comradeship of Active Citizens of Russia (known by their Russian acronym TIGR) emerged from protests in the Russian Far East against governmental order #943 on December 10, 2008, increasing taxes on foreign used cars imported into Russia. Riot police were flown in from Moscow to disperse large crowds of protestors, attracting international media attention (Ref B). Representatives from TIGR attended FAR's November 14 national meeting in Novosibirsk.

-- The Committee for the Protection of Automobilists' Rights (KZPA) is an inter-regional public movement defending the legal rights of automobilists and pedestrians registered in ¶2006.

-- Svoboda Vybora (Freedom of Choice) was created following protests held on May 19, 2005 against government regulations preventing the import of right-hand drive Japanese cars. Officially registered in 2006, the organization is actively involved in negotiations with regional leaders on social and legislative issues related to automobilists' rights. In 2008 Svoboda Vybora became a member of an Expert Council of the State Duma Committee on Transportation.

-- The Society for the Protection of Automobilists' Rights

(OZPA), of which Sergey Kanaev is chairman. Registered in 2001, the organization publishes the newspaper "Avtopravo," and works closely with FAR on legislative goals.

Comment

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(C) In the last year, government legislation aimed at raising the cost of car ownership has met with active and organized protest from a significant constituency in the population. FAR has emerged, along with TIGR, as a leading conduit for car owners to express their views to the government. According to Kanaev, FAR intends to foster social control of government by empowering individual car owners to make their position known to the government. Kanaev envisions an organization respected by the government as a source of pragmatic analysis, and a representation of popular feeling, which can work as a partner in creating better legislation. Opposition political movements in Russia have struggled to mobilize popular support for democratization. FAR's drive toward social control may provide a new model for overcoming the general political apathy of Russian voters by focusing on common sense solutions to "meat and potatoes" issues. While previous automobilists' associations have floated similar plans and failed to deliver, the recent successes of FAR may earn them the credibility with the government, political parties and individual drivers they need to get their nose over the line.

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